

## ‘(S)extremism’

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**‘(S)extremism’: Imagining Violent Women in the Twenty-First Century with Navine G. Khan-Dossos and Julia Kristeva**

**Abstract:**

The neologism ‘(s)extremism’ indicates a nexus of ideas intrinsic to the way in which contemporary culture imagines the figure of the violent woman. Firstly, it identifies the *sexism* visible in reactions to such women; secondly it highlights the fact that these misogynistic responses are often predicated precisely on *sex*, not (only) on *gender* (i.e. on assumptions about woman’s biological function); thirdly it highlights the question mark that hovers over the issue of what *extremism* is – especially when applied to women. To examine and theorize these ideas, the article moves beyond existing works in critical terrorism studies and looks to research-informed art installations by international artist Navine G. Khan-Dossos, with whom the author has collaborated, and to the writings of Julia Kristeva who explores the link between female ‘extremism’ and ‘exceptionality’, and describes how feminism itself is constituted with regard to the socio-symbolic order as a form of terroristic violence.

**‘(S)extremism’: Imagining Violent Women in the Twenty-First Century with Navine G. Khan-Dossos and Julia Kristeva**

**LISA DOWNING**

**Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

*It must be pointed out [...] that since the dawn of feminism, and certainly before, the political activity of exceptional women, and thus in a certain sense of liberated women, has taken the form of murder, conspiracy, and crime.*

*(Julia Kristeva, ‘Le temps des femmes’ (1979) / ‘Women’s Time’ (1981))*

This article considers the cultural concept of extremism and its connection with exceptionality, especially when applied to female subjects. Exceptionality here, as for Julia Kristeva who, in the epigraph above, links female terrorists to feminist pioneers, pertains to aberrant and violent individuals *and* to liberated, creative ones. Exceptional or extreme tendencies, characteristics, and qualities, when embodied in a woman, are understood markedly differently than the same qualities when embodied in a man. This has much to do with the ways in which the whole idea of ‘self’ is inherently coded as masculine, and male actions understood as rational by default.<sup>2</sup> Female exceptionality and wilful female subjectivity therefore inevitably appear as a form of – at least symbolic – violence or extremism.

In what follows, I turn specifically to the category of the ‘extremist woman’. I coin the term ‘(s)extremism’ to indicate the nexus of interconnected ideas intrinsic to the way in which contemporary culture imagines this figure. Within the category of what is deemed ‘extremist woman’, we might find, firstly and most obviously, women who commit or

facilitate physical violence in the pursuit of a political or ideological agenda (female terrorists). Secondly, we might consider those with political affiliations that are associated with macho or anti-women projects – whether fundamentalist theocratic or far-Right – without committing physical violence. And thirdly, and conversely, as resonates with the quotation from Kristeva’s canonical essay with which I open, we might consider those who pursue feminist politics that are deemed excessive or extreme. The content of the feminist political belief deemed ‘extremist’ will vary historically according to the values, fashions, and ideologies of the epoch, but one can also make the argument that feminism by its nature, *where it genuinely opposes the aims of a patriarchal status-quo rather than appeasing it*, fulfils a symbolically violent function.

‘(S)extremism’, as I am imagining it, and in its different manifestations, thus involves three interlinked concepts. Firstly, and crucially, it identifies a form of *sexism* in cultural responses to outlier women. Secondly, and relatedly, it draws attention to the fact that these misogynistic responses are often predicated precisely on understandings of *sex*, not only of *gender* (i.e. they are situated on the politically contested ground that is woman’s biology as well as on assumptions about femininity and the nature of a ‘proper’ woman). Thirdly, the term highlights the question mark that hovers over the issue of what *extremism* is – especially when applied to women. This article, then, explores the construction of the figure of the extremist woman in a contemporary culture that increasingly struggles to dissociate ‘symbolic violence’ from ‘literal violence’ and that often mistakes the former for the latter.

In the interests of clarity, and mindful of not claiming a term as my own without looking at prior uses of related terms, I note that ‘sextremism’, without my parentheses around the ‘s’, has been previously used by the Ukrainian activist group Femen to describe their overtly sexualized methods of protest (they often appear topless or in various stages of undress). Femen term themselves ‘sextremist feminists’. In this meaning of the term, the

‘sex’ obviously refers to the deployment of hyper-sexualization and ‘sex-positivism’ as a strategy of political resistance. In the title of an article from 2014, Emily Channell asks ‘is sextremism the new feminism?’, and writes of Femen and the Russian group Pussy Riot: ‘both groups appropriate sexual language and imagery as well as physical sexuality in protest of their current regimes’.<sup>3</sup> While a relevant phenomenon for this discussion, this meaning of ‘sextremism’, where ‘sex’ equals strategic sexualization, is not the primary one I am focusing on. My concept here is of extremism with the sex of the perpetrator as a *modifier of how that extremism is read*. The term, then, presupposes *sex* in the sense of *belonging to a sex class* (to use what is often assumed to be an outmoded feminist concept as it is linked to the class analysis beloved of radical feminism, rather than to the gender identity politics of the current ‘wave’) – and which leads directly to *sexism*. ‘(S)extremism’ as a term also deliberately signals the way in which the sexism inherent to perceptions of female extremism is often occluded, unconscious, or *bracketed off*.

In what follows, to examine and theorize these ideas, I will look to research-informed art installations by international artist Navine G. Khan-Dossos, with whom I have recently collaborated on two relevant exhibitions, ‘Echo Chamber’ (2017) and ‘Shoot the Women First’ (2018). I will also engage further with the work of Kristeva. I revisit her classic essay ‘Women’s Time’ (1979), which considers female terrorism as the result of women’s alienation from the socio-symbolic order. I also briefly consider her more recent published volume of interviews and essays *This Incredible Need to Believe* (2009), which constitutes a plea for a secular humanism based on the creative arts and humanities, and on an acceptance of female exceptionality (what we might call a feminist post-post-secular turn) in the face of a perceived crisis of extremism and in place of the ‘war on terror’.

My decision to use artworks and feminist philosophy as the underpinning theoretical context of this article is in the service of demonstrating how artistic and theoretical praxis

may be at least as pertinent for articulating ‘(s)extremism’ as more straightforward critical discourses, such as that embodied by existing works in critical terrorism studies (or CTS). CTS has emerged in recent years as a body of scholarship which distinguishes itself, according to Richard Jackson, by its ‘particular critical theory-influenced ontology [...] its methodological pluralism [...] and its scepticism towards official counterterrorism culture and practices’.<sup>4</sup> Despite feminist and gender studies methods drawn from the social sciences being fairly prominent in CTS, Kristeva’s writings and those of other French feminists have not so far been taken up by writers in this discipline, and considerations of artistic praxis as a political and intellectual intervention are also absent. The reflections in this article thereby constitute an original contribution to this broader field.

### **Canonical Studies of Female Extremists**

Before moving on to the original theorization in this article, as indicated above, it is necessary to acknowledge and briefly discuss the key works in the body of extant literature on female extremists and female terrorists. The earliest of these, journalist Eileen MacDonald’s book *Shoot the Women First* (1991), takes its title from the direction reputedly given in the 1980s to members of West Germany’s anti-terrorist squad. It subsequently became standard advice offered by Interpol to other European agencies in the wake of attacks carried out by the Baader-Meinhof group, the Red Brigade, the IRA, and other paramilitary groups that included female terrorists. The advice that the armed response unit should kill female terrorists first, as they will not hesitate to shoot and are more impulsive than male terrorists, follows the familiar line borrowed from Rudyard Kipling that ‘the female is more deadly than the male’, which MacDonald uses as the epigraph of her book.

MacDonald attempts to account for the instruction by extrapolating that the especially violent zeal of the female terrorists whom she interviews, including Ulrike Meinhoff, the Palestinian fighter Leila Khaled, and the Female Basque Separatist agents of ETA, issues universally from a displaced maternal feeling: the political or nationalist cause stands in for the child that the woman would properly be protecting. She writes:

It was as if the women were capable of projecting maternal instincts onto the cause. A mother will turn killer to protect her young and if such a projection of maternal instincts is possible, it may go some way to explaining why many of the women seemed to be so much more dedicated, single-minded and determined than their male comrades.<sup>5</sup>

The observed likelihood of female terrorists reacting more violently than their male counterparts and resorting to violent action earlier in a confrontation is only comprehensible, it seems, in the context of a cultural consensus on women's 'natural instinct'. And to return to Kipling, we see that the line that has become something of a cliché refers to both literal animals and to maternal (animal) instinct:

When the Himalayan peasant meets the he-bear in his pride,  
He shouts to scare the monster, who will often turn aside.  
But the she-bear thus accosted rends the peasant tooth and nail  
For the female of the species is more deadly than the male.<sup>6</sup>

MacDonald's logic and the assertions in her book would largely set the tone for understandings of extremist women for more than a decade. In their game-changing critical

study of violent women and of the discourses surrounding them, *Mothers, Monsters, Whores* (2007), Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry take issue with the logic that MacDonald propounded. They write:

Women engaged in proscribed violence are often portrayed either as ‘mothers’, women who are fulfilling their biological destinies; as ‘monsters’, women who are pathologically damaged and are therefore drawn to violence [...]; or as ‘whores’, women whose violence is inspired by sexual dependence and depravity.<sup>7</sup>

What they point out here is effectively that women’s motivations are repeatedly reduced to biological determinism gone awry (maternal instinct or erotic instinct, both diverted into violence) or to pathology (violent women are monstrous or mad in transgressing the pacifistic life-giving nature that is assumed to be proper to women). In the latter vein, they write that ‘[v]iolent women are not women at all, but singular mistakes and freak accidents’,<sup>8</sup> evoking what I have called elsewhere, examples of ‘identity category violation’.<sup>9</sup> What they also uncover is a tendency in scholarship, as in media and popular discourse, to downplay any distinction between women’s actions as rational, chosen, pragmatic, and logical in favour of appeals to their bodily (or animal) nature. Female reason is, in fact, consistently denied – a female terrorist’s commitment to her cause is always understood in instinctual, rather than rational, terms. Sjoberg and Gentry write: ‘Very few researchers actually depict violent women as rational actors’.<sup>10</sup>

The belief that female terrorists are deadlier than their male counterparts, then, issues from the longstanding masculinist cultural conviction that ‘maternal instinct’ (perverted here into a political cause) is a strange and overwhelmingly powerful urge. But if women are



indeed more zealous than men when taking violent political action, it may be because so great is the transgression committed when one born into the ‘sex class’ is driven by a political agenda (something assumed proper only to men) that her violence will be single-minded and terrible. This is because it stands as the achievement of pure will over the – powerfully effective and affective – myth of maternal, passive, care-giving, and altruistic female nature.

### **Imagining (S)extremism with Navine G. Khan-Dossos (1): ‘Echo Chamber’ (2017)**

If rationality is denied in cultural narratives about extremist women in favour of a focus on instinct, as pointed out by Sjöberg and Gentry, what is also denied is any meaningful focus on the interiority, reflectiveness, imagination, individuality, or subjectivity of such women, since the female body and the *appearance* of the ‘(s)extremist’ subject are so often over-emphasized – and sometimes fetishized. In *The Subject of Murder* (2013) I explored how photographs, court drawings, and mug shots are among key currencies produced, over-exposed and exchanged to gain a literal – but overdetermined – ‘picture’ of murderous women. The perfect example of this is the police photograph of Myra Hindley, the child-killer dubbed ‘The Most Evil Woman in Britain’, that has so often been reproduced in print media and, in recent decades, shared on the internet. It has taken on an iconic status and, in 1995, became the basis for Marcus Harvey’s controversial artwork ‘Myra’, which used casts of children’s handprints to reproduce the killer’s mugshot. At her trial in 1965, commentators and journalists insisted that Hindley’s evil nature could be read on her face, with one, Pamela Hansford Johnson, writing that Hindley’s accomplice, Ian Brady, ‘looks ordinary’ while ‘Myra Hindley does not’,<sup>11</sup> and focusing on ‘the Medusa face of Hindley, under the melon puffball of hair’.<sup>12</sup> The violent woman is visually read, via an insistent, penetrating gaze, as unnatural and her appearance is called upon both to *reveal* and to *confirm* her nature.

The British-born, Athens-based artist Navine G. Khan-Dossos read *The Subject of Murder* while planning an exhibition, 'Echo Chamber'. She contacted me in early 2017 to invite me to take part in a conversation on the subject of women, representation, and violence, to accompany the work. 'Echo Chamber' explores the phenomenon surrounding Samantha Lewthwaite, known in the press as the 'White Widow', a white British convert to Islam from Aylesbury, born in 1983, who would become the widow of Germaine Lindsey, one of the men responsible for the 7/7 bombing in London in 2005. Lewthwaite disappeared from Britain and has since entered extremist folklore as the reputed inspiration for, or organizer of, a number of international terror attacks, including the bombing of a football match in Mombasa in 2012 and the Westgate Shopping Mall attack in Nairobi in 2013. She is often described as the symbolic 'mother' of all Jihadists and has, in fact, given birth to a number of children with a series of Jihadi husbands. She serves as an iconic muse for Al-Shabaab.

Lewthwaite's selfies have appeared in the international press and virally on the internet, making her a prime example of a violent woman whose image has been overshared – or overexposed – as an attempt, perhaps, to compensate for the little that is factually known about her life, motivations, and current movements. Early photographs show the smiling schoolgirl in secular dress while, in later selfies, she is veiled with only her expressive eyes visible. The effect of this multiple over-exposure of Lewthwaite's face is to reduce her entire being to *image* – to a Western, and then to a starkly differentiated Islamic, femininity, underscoring how a focus on the physicality of femaleness characterizes culture's response to violent women.

While Lewthwaite is clearly an exceptional subject – the consummate '(s)extremist' – documentary filmmaker Adam Wishart sought in the film he made about her in 2014, *The White Widow: Searching for Samantha*, to restore to perceptions of this extraordinary

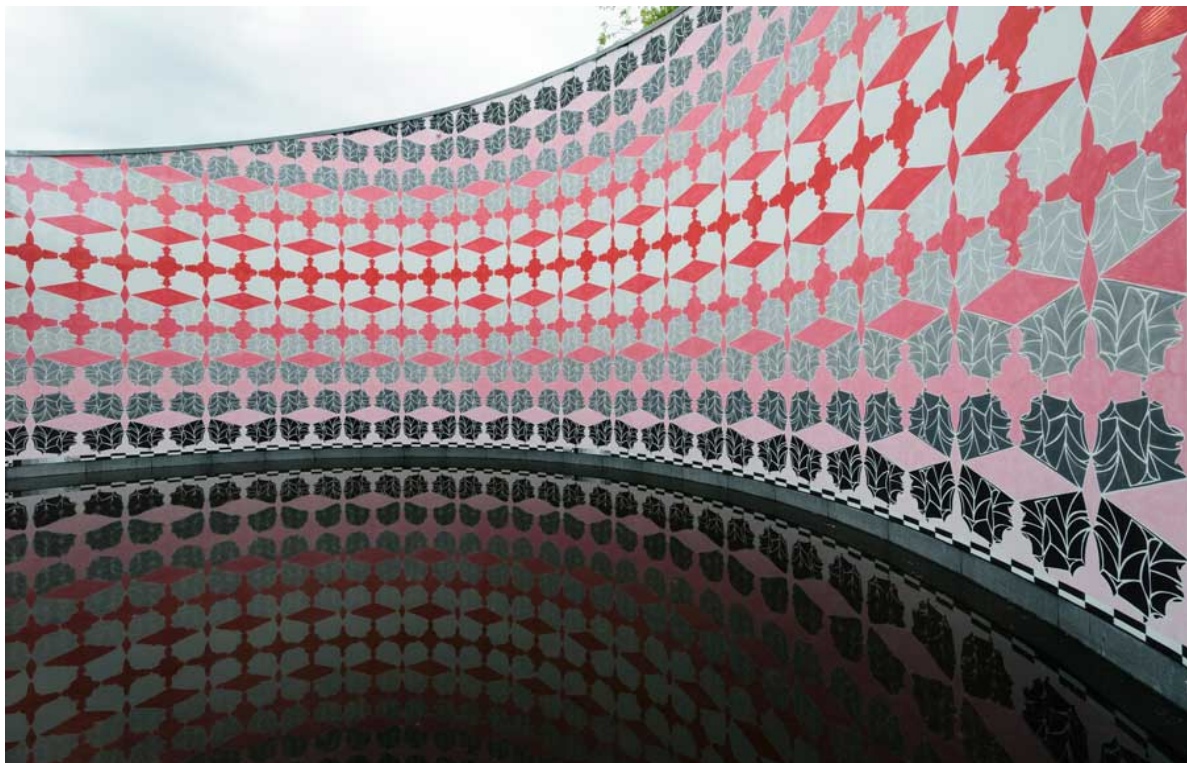
individual a sense of her very ordinariness. Discussing the film in an interview with Zoe Williams for *The Guardian*, he stated:

I'm always struck by how banal it all is. All that narrative of terrorism is about hate preachers who brainwashed X. I think it's much simpler than that. She is in this extreme place now. If you follow every step she took, they almost all make sense. If I think about my own life, if I had altered the trajectory of each decision I'd made over 20 years, then I too would be in a very different place. The one step she made that doesn't make sense was when she began to believe that violence is the right course.<sup>13</sup>

Violence here is seen almost as a mere misstep or mishap, rather than as a rational decision or the result of political conviction. The 'banality of evil' having become something of a cliché in discussions of political violence in the wake of Hannah Arendt's classic work, it can easily be used to erase the possibility of agentic wilfulness, especially, I would argue, in the case of women. Discourses about Lewthwaite's case draw repeatedly on the paradoxical pair of 'extraordinary' and 'ordinary'. Describing Lewthwaite's self-presentation in selfies leaked to the press and found in objects from her raided dwellings, Zoe Williams writes that Lewthwaite 'wears her radicalisation (sic) so proudly, but it sits strange and ersatz upon her, like she bought it in Claire's Accessories'.<sup>14</sup> Wishart's and Williams's rhetorical gestures here simultaneously *humanize* Lewthwaite and *diminish* her.

Khan-Dossos's 'Echo Chamber', which was installed in Het Oog (The Eye), at the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, the Netherlands, and ran from May-November 2017, is an aniconic portrait. As such, it constitutes a gesture of resistance to the incessant focus on Lewthwaite's physicality and to the media attention designed to turn her into a mythic,

maternal martyr figure. But it also rejects the banalization that is the standard leftist, counter-strategy to othering and mythologizing discourses of the extremist, and it allows the possibility of Lewthwaite, *qua* agentic individual, to emerge. Khan-Dossos, in short, dares to think about, and attempts to convey, a sense of Lewthwaite's *subjectivity* in place of representing her corporeal form or her deeds. The artist made a conscious decision that no photograph or drawn portrait of Lewthwaite would appear in the gallery space or in any of the printed material that accompanied the exhibition. 'Echo Chamber', for Khan-Dossos, has the aim of representing an 'unknown inner landscape ... as a way to counter and question the common representations of women and violence'.<sup>15</sup>



(Fig. 1. 'Echo Chamber'. Copyright: Navine G. Khan-Dossos / The Van Abbemuseum)

Khan-Dossos's artistic training includes a specialism in Islamic art that she deployed in the painted work. Taking up the whole of the curved wall behind glass that is 'The Eye', 'Echo Chamber' comprises a repetitive pattern of muqarnas, an Islamic architectural form,

while along the bottom of the painting Khan-Dossos depicted a forensic ruler.

Representational and cultural registers are juxtaposed, such that intimations of meditation, devotion, and aesthetic tradition sit alongside the iconography of securitization, counterterrorism, and crime. The artist also employed a limited colour palette to create a visual ‘symbolic language’.<sup>16</sup> Red, pink, white, grey, and black juxtapose and represent – respectively – danger and ‘high alert’, stereotypical femininity, purity, the ‘grey zone’, and ultimately the colour of death as well as ‘the political colour of choice for many extremist movements’.<sup>17</sup> ‘Echo Chamber’, then, is a study – simultaneously and paradoxically – in demystification *and* unknowability. It focuses on the not-easily-apprehended. We cannot know what Lewthwaite is doing now or where she is – but nor should we assume that we can categorize or entirely comprehend her on the basis of what she has let us see and what has been reproduced of her in the form of straightforward figuration.

**Imagining (S)extremism with Navine G. Khan-Dossos (2): ‘Shoot the Women First’  
(2018)**

This exhibition, which debuted at the Breeder Gallery in Athens, Greece, in March 2018, takes as its name the title of the first published study of female terrorists, MacDonald’s *Shoot the Women First*, discussed above. The exhibition is designed to resemble a shooting gallery; visitors work their way through a number of rooms hung with a series of painted gesso panels featuring various symbols, including those resembling discretionary command training targets, on backgrounds of pink and grey. The symbols on the targets become more recognizably humanoid as the visitor progresses through the space. To accompany Khan-Dossos’s visual interactive experience, I wrote a text that was placed online and distributed in a printed form to gallery attendees, and a choreographed performance was created by

Yasmina Reggad, in which performers wore cardboard simulacra of the painted targets. Thus, this exhibition was a multimedia, collaborative, co-created effort, in which all of the parts that make up the exhibition are united by a concern with the meaning of the term ‘target’ and the ways in which women are made to fill this role.



(Fig 2. ‘Shoot the Women First’. Copyright: Navine G. Khan-Dossos / The Breeder Gallery)

The exhibition was site-specific insofar as the Breeder Gallery is located in Athens’s Red-Light District. One of Khan-Dossos’s influences in deciding to think about women as targets was an incident from 2012, in which female drug-users suspected of doing casual sex work in Athens were rounded up by the police and submitted to forced HIV testing. Those found to have a positive test result were prosecuted for grievous bodily harm by means of transmitting the virus and were imprisoned. The suspects’ personal information was released by the police to the media, leading to further stigmatization of female sex workers and women living with HIV. The ‘sex’ of ‘(s)extremism’ is evoked here in the elision between violence and sex, a sexual woman and a violent woman, the targeted and the target.

In Khan-Dossos’s words ‘the paintings in this exhibition reflect on the role of women regarded by society as both perpetrators and victims of violence, questioning what it means to

be both a menace and a target'.<sup>18</sup> In my text to accompany the show, I reflected on precisely this double-edged and bidirectional sword that women outliers both wield and are assailed by. When a female extremist targets an institution (be it Western secular liberal democracy or the patriarchy) is it pertinent to bear in mind that she may well act from the conviction that her identity or interests have already been targeted and violated by the hegemonic order. In articulating the injury against her carried out by the powers that be, the (s)extremist woman herself becomes once again the target of opprobrium, censure, and othering.

In the discretionary command training that the exhibition evokes, shooters are told to listen to commands and shoot the shapes and colours in a given order. The ambiguity as to who is responsible for the violence in such an exercise – the shooter or the one giving the orders – echoes the workings of a misogynistic culture in which violence done to women who stick their heads above the parapet originates from multiple locations and is self-justificatory. There is a certain *automation* to cultural misogyny, as it repeats the age-old punishment of outlier women – witches, midwives, scolds – those perceived as extremist owing to the threat they pose to the order that seeks to control and define them.

My aim in articulating the function of 'the target' was, at least in part, to expose the material nature of the 'extra danger' that the instruction 'Shoot the women first' describes and to lay bare the logic underpinning it. When a woman asserts her agency and breaks free from her sex's age-old role as victim, she challenges the authority of that system and throws the legitimacy of its rules into question. To conclude my essay, I wrote:

[T]he violent woman is perceived as *more violent* simply by dint of the exceptional effort of violating so completely the category to which she has been coercively assigned. It is thus that the woman becomes the first and most urgent target for annihilation: she refused to be what she was told she was'.<sup>19</sup>

## Reading feminist extremism via Kristeva's 'Women's Time'

If the exhibitions discussed above were visual attempts to *acknowledge* without straightforwardly *representing* the condition of outlier women, and to gesture towards the multiple institutional terms in which extremist female subjectivity is framed without legitimizing those terms or those institutions, then Kristeva's 'Women's Time' can be seen to do something similar in textual form with regard to women's relationship to what she calls the 'socio-symbolic order'. The essay is an ambitious and imaginative attempt to understand the historical locatedness of female subjectivity and feminist movements via an exploration of the ways in which women have been excluded from what Kristeva calls 'the time of history'. The essay discusses both political or terrorist violence and feminist projects as attempts by women to deal with the symbolic exclusion they face. In particular, in some quite striking ways, the logic of Kristeva's argument parallels in discursive form the attempts made visually and textually in Khan-Dossos's 'Shoot the Women First' to articulate how targeting works in the context of women's (perceived or actual) violence.

Kristeva describes 'two generations' of feminism',<sup>20</sup> which is her way of talking about what are often termed the first and second waves of feminism, but which she insists must be understood as feminist modalities or *positions* rather than just as sequential historical trends. She argues that the 'first generation' sought to 'gain a place in linear time' via rights-based gains – a feminism 'deeply rooted in the socio-political life of nations'.<sup>21</sup> Such aims are seen to follow a logic of identification with 'the logical and ontological values of a rationality dominant in the nation state'.<sup>22</sup> This is her way of understanding the liberal, first-wave



feminism of the early twentieth century, associated with the suffragettes and their ilk who sought to achieve parity of rights with men in the civic sphere (women as selves and equals).

Her definition of the second generation is of the post-1968 group of women who would form what has also been called the second wave.<sup>23</sup> Describing what has commonly become known as ‘difference feminism’, she writes of the post-structural refusal of ‘the universal’ characterized by this generation and applied to the condition of women, and the rejection of any desire for women’s incorporation into the time of history. Rather, she argues that ‘[t]hese women seek to give a language to the intersubjective and corporeal experiences left mute by culture in the past’ and that ‘this feminism situates itself outside the linear time of identities’.<sup>24</sup>

Kristeva argues that the egalitarian, rights-based aims of first-wave feminism were largely met under systems such as Eastern European communism which had a surfeit of women doctors and leaders. However, she argues that this brought no symbolic recognition of the difference of female subjectivity; indeed sexual difference remained occluded under both capitalist and communist societies. This raises two questions with regard to women and power. Firstly, Kristeva asks: ‘What happens when women come into power and identify with it?’, and secondly: ‘What happens when, on the contrary, they refuse power and create a parallel society, a counter-power which then takes on aspects ranging from a club of ideas to a group of terrorist commandos?’<sup>25</sup> The answer she offers is that, in fact, these ‘parallel societies’ or counter societies inevitably end up imitating the structure they set out to resist. She states that having more women in power has not changed the shape or form of hierarchy and that women have identified with and repeated the most totalitarian of power structures. Inevitably, perhaps, she uses the Nazis as her example. Kristeva seems to argue here that women’s response to structural misogyny, and to a violent culture, is to turn the socio-

symbolic violence they experience against themselves back against that society (the targeted becoming the target):

But when a subject is too brutally excluded from this sociosymbolic stratum; when, for example, a woman feels her affective life as a woman or her condition as a social being too brutally ignored by existing discourse or power [...] she may, by counterinvesting the violence she has endured, make of herself a 'possessed' agent of this violence in order to combat what was experienced as frustration – with arms which may seem disproportional, but which are not so in comparison with the subjective or more precisely narcissistic suffering from which they originate.<sup>26</sup>

So, to concretize, whereas a far-Right-wing female activist over-identifies with the existing ideological power and seeks to extend it (let us say, for example, Marine Le Pen), the radical Islamic woman (personified, perhaps, by Samantha Lewthwaite) rejects Western democratic secularism and identifies with another form of fundamentalism. And, distinctly but analogously, radical feminists produce what Kristeva calls a counter-society on the basis of a sex-based exclusivity that she thinks ends up being nothing more than a kind of 'inverted sexism'.<sup>27</sup> Protest movements such as feminism are thus seen inherently to imitate the structure of the society they reject or oppose. Kristeva writes: 'the very logic of counterpower and of countersociety necessarily generates, by its very structure, its essence as a simulacrum of the combated society or of power'.<sup>28</sup>

Kristeva's analysis of female violence in *Women's Time* allows us to understand (s)extremism as a rational – that is justified and appropriate – response to a stultifying situation of symbolic and literal violence and cultural sexism, yet one which inevitably apes

aspects of what it opposes. In analyzing both the case of Samantha Lewthwaite for ‘Echo Chamber’ and the mechanism of targeting for ‘Shoot the Women First’ in collaboration with Khan-Dossos, it became crucial to restore to extremist women their status of ‘rational agent’ that Sjoberg and Gentry point out is repeatedly denied them. Female extremism, as understood in Kristevan terms, is a *rational response* to a violent patriarchal order.

Yet, however rational a response it may be, Kristeva argues that female extremism often fails the women who strategically employ it. She implicitly appears to argue that all collectivist movements are inevitably prone to becoming rotten with power and makes a surprising gesture towards individuality as a way out of the impasse when she hopes that ‘having started with the idea of difference, feminism will be able to break free of its belief in Woman, Her power, Her writing’.<sup>29</sup> Here she suggests that feminism should free itself of a totalizing and collectivizing notion of ‘Woman’, in upper-case letters – a cipher, a false idol belonging to the past and redolent of the patriarchal order’s definition of what she is. The aim instead would be ‘to bring out the singularity of each woman, and beyond this her multiplicities, her plural languages, beyond the horizon, beyond sight, beyond faith itself’.<sup>30</sup>

### **Conclusion: (S)exceptionality as an Antidote to (S)extremism?**

To conclude, I will continue my dialogue with Kristeva, but move closer to the present by engaging with her interview with Carmine Donzelli, originally published in Italian and subsequently translated into English in the volume entitled *This Incredible Need to Believe*. In the interview, Kristeva addresses the enduring problem that she perceives to exist of ‘a prepolitical and prereligious need to believe’.<sup>31</sup> She links the simultaneous and paradoxical rise of secularism to the perceived increase in extremist ideology, while also arguing that ‘[c]ontrary to what some would have us believe, the clash of religions is but a surface

phenomenon'.<sup>32</sup> In place of a reassertion of religion qua moral code or safeguard against violence (as it has so obviously failed in the latter regard), Kristeva advocates something that resembles a secular ethics of awe that is intimately linked to the feminist struggles she sketched out 30 years earlier in 'Women's Time' and the difficulty – and necessity – of seeing woman in the singular.

She writes:

Might this partaking, of each one of us, in the genius of the 'great men and women' rehabilitate, in our present culture, the self-surpassing that both antiquity and the Jewish and Christian religions or, in yet another way, the 'genius' of the 'great men', encouraged? The twentieth century was forced to admit, under the pressure of various kinds of feminism, the existence of feminine genius, once all too easily reduced to maternal devotion and manual work.<sup>33</sup>

Here, Kristeva makes the striking argument that the artistic creation produced by the 'genius' – and the genius of exceptional women in particular – might address multiple structural aporia. A first would be the gap left by the waning of faith (or better the absence of meaning) in which violence fomented. A second would be the absence of a role for creative individual agency in the structures that oppositional collectives repeat, even as they seek to dismantle them, as argued in 'Women's Time'. In this context, Kristeva recalls her three-volume work *Feminine Genius (Le Génie féminin)*, written between 2001 and 2004, with volumes on Hannah Arendt, Melanie Klein, and Colette, as announcing the possibility of 'another era opening up' that is 'over and beyond the war of the sexes that has marked the twentieth century'.<sup>34</sup> She writes: 'Women, traditionally relegated to reproductive tasks but having acceded to subjective excellence in every domain, highlight the special meaning I give to the

idea of genius'.<sup>35</sup> Ann Jefferson, in a discussion of Kristeva's original contribution to the concept of 'genius', defines it as both recognizing exceptionality and inspiring or inviting the coming-into-being of a previously unsung (female)subject position.<sup>36</sup>

I have used the term '(s)extremism' in this article to suggest a paradox, a difficulty, for the cultural imagination concerning women who take up political positions that are counter to sex role stereotypes, or – at the limit – who commit politically motivated violence. By way of tentative conclusion, I am arguing, with Kristeva, that the cultural antidote to the 'problem' of violent women is an acknowledgement of women's individuality, capacity for greatness, ability to exist as selves rather than just as representatives of a group. This is because the difficulty of conceiving women as violent agents issues from the very same cultural biases as the difficulty of conceiving women as geniuses. Men, as the default subject (as transcendental rather than immanent, in Simone de Beauvoir's language), are assumed to possess both the capacity to destroy and the capacity to create or produce; women have historically only been acknowledged for their capacity to *reproduce*, hence the hackneyed, cod-psychology explanation for female terrorism found in so many accounts, and exemplified especially by MacDonald. This does not mean that I think, as Kristeva seems to, that recourse to the arts and a celebration of female genius *alone* can save us from either structural misogyny or from the violence of terroristic projects. Rather, the symbolic violence done to women every day when they are assumed to be *of a collective mind and for a (bodily) function*, rather than *singular rational selves* could be alleviated by a re-evaluation of female selfhood as a legitimate phenomenon. In sum, to the problem of (s)extremism, adapting Kristeva, I advocate the coming into being of at least an acceptance, at best a celebration, of female individual achievement – dare I even say of *(s)exceptionality*?

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<sup>2</sup> I explored some of these ideas previously in my monograph on the gendering of killers, Lisa Downing, *The Subject of Murder: Gender, Exceptionality, and the Modern Killer* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013). I returned to them in a different form in my most recent work, Downing, *Selfish Women* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), which looks at women who espouse political and philosophical values of individualism and analyzes how they are regarded with suspicion by both feminist and mainstream discourses.

<sup>3</sup> Emily Channell, 'Is Sextremism the New Feminism? Perspectives from Pussy Riot and Femen', *Nationalities Papers: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity* 42:4 (2014), 611-14 (611).

<sup>4</sup> Richard Jackson, 'Introduction', Richard Jackson (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Critical Terrorism Studies* (New York and London: Routledge, 2016), 2.

<sup>5</sup> Eileen MacDonald, *Shoot the Women First* [1991] (London: Arrow Books, 1992), 236.

<sup>6</sup> Rudyard Kipling, 'The Female of the Species' (1911). Cited in MacDonald, *Shoot the Women First*, n.p.

<sup>7</sup> Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry, *Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women's Violence in Global Politics* (London: Zed Books, 2007), 12.

<sup>8</sup> Sjoberg and Gentry, *Mothers, Monsters, Whores*, 14.

<sup>9</sup> See: Downing, 'The Body Politic: Gender, the Right Wing, and "Identity Category Violations"', *French Cultural Studies* 29:4 (2018), 1-11.

<sup>10</sup> Sjoberg and Gentry, *Mothers, Monsters, Whores*, 14.

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<sup>11</sup> Pamela Hansford Johnson, *On Iniquity: Some Personal Reflections Arising out of the Moors Murders Trial* (London: Macmillan, 1967), 22.

<sup>12</sup> Hansford Johnson, *On Iniquity*, 89.

<sup>13</sup> Cited in: Zoe Williams, 'The Radicalisation of Samantha Lewthwaite, the Aylesbury Schoolgirl who Became the White Widow', *The Guardian*, 27 June 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/jun/27/what-radicalised-samantha-lewthwaite-77-london-bombings>, consulted 6 March 2019, 1.00 p.m.

<sup>14</sup> Cited in: Williams, 'The Radicalisation of Samantha Lewthwaite'.

<sup>15</sup> Navine G. Khan-Dossos, 'Echo Chamber', artist's website, <http://www.khandossos.com/works/echo-chamber/>, consulted 6 March 2019, 1.00 p.m.

<sup>16</sup> Khan-Dossos, 'Echo Chamber', artist's website.

<sup>17</sup> Khan-Dossos, 'Echo Chamber', artist's website.

<sup>18</sup> Khan-Dossos, 'Shoot the Women First', artist's website, <http://www.khandossos.com/works/shoot-the-women-first/>, consulted 6 March 2019, 1.00 p.m.

<sup>19</sup> Downing, 'Shoot the Women First: A Reflection on the Gender Politics of Targeting', <http://www.khandossos.com/works/shoot-the-women-first/lisa-downing-a-reflection-on-the-gender-politics-of-targeting/> consulted 6 March 2019, 1.00 p.m.

<sup>20</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'Women's Time', translated by Alice Jardine and Harry Blake [1979], *Signs*, 7:1 (1981), 13-35: 18.

<sup>21</sup> Kristeva, 'Women's Time', 18.

<sup>22</sup> Kristeva, 'Women's Time', 19.

<sup>23</sup> There is a distinct, if not surprising, Francocentrism to Kristeva's account, in so far as the feminism she discusses here is that of French tradition, being broadly split along two philosophical lines: the 'sexual difference' feminism of the psychoanalytically influenced

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‘psych et po’ group with which Kristeva herself is most closely aligned, and the Marxian, material feminism associated with groups such as ‘Questions féministes’. The Anglophone second wave looks different in a number of ways.

<sup>24</sup> Kristeva, ‘Women’s Time’, 19.

<sup>25</sup> Kristeva, ‘Women’s Time’, 26.

<sup>26</sup> Kristeva, ‘Women’s Time’, 28.

<sup>27</sup> Kristeva, ‘Women’s Time’, 27.

<sup>28</sup> Kristeva, ‘Women’s Time’, 28.

<sup>29</sup> Kristeva, ‘Women’s Time’, 32.

<sup>30</sup> Kristeva, ‘Women’s Time’, 33.

<sup>31</sup> Kristeva, *This Incredible Need to Believe* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009),

n.p.

<sup>32</sup> Kristeva, *This Incredible Need*, 26.

<sup>33</sup> Kristeva, *This Incredible Need*, 38.

<sup>34</sup> Kristeva, *This Incredible Need*, 40.

<sup>35</sup> Kristeva, *This Incredible Need*, 40.

<sup>36</sup> Ann Jefferson, *Genius in France: An Idea and its Uses* (Princeton and Oxford: Princr) .

Jefferson writes: “the Singularity that Kristeva identifies as the central feature of genius is not innate, so much as achieved, and the work of genius is the means whereby its exemplar realized herself as a subject” (213).